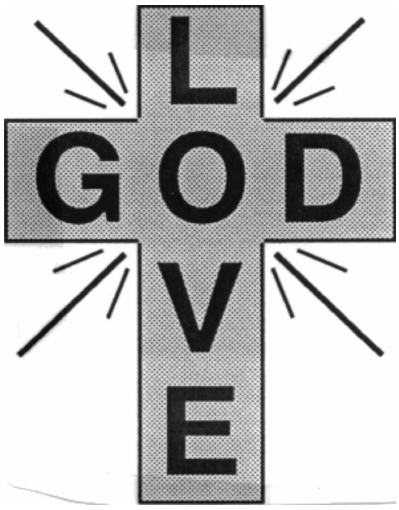

ELI

By Jim Giatas

"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." — Hebrews 13:5

Dedication

To every child who once knew the King's voice
and wonders if He still speaks.

To every young heart that has wandered,
and every older heart that still remembers the way home.

To those who carry shame quietly,
who fight battles no one sees,
who long for freedom but fear they are beyond it.

To the mentors, parents, teachers, and friends
who refuse to give up on the ones they love.

And to the King Himself —
who never left,
never stopped calling,
never stopped loving,
and never stopped walking beside us.

This book is for you.

Introduction

Before Eli lost his way,
he knew the King's voice.

Before the shadows,
there was light.
Before the wandering,
there was wonder.
Before the breaking,
there was a boy who walked with God
as naturally as breathing.

This is the story of how he forgot—
and how the King remembered.

It is the story of a fall that felt final,
a darkness that felt deserved,
and a whisper that refused to fade.

A whisper that said:

“I never left.”

If you have ever wandered,
ever doubted,
ever carried shame quietly,
ever longed for the Voice you once knew—
then Eli’s journey is yours.

May these pages lead you back
to the One who has been walking beside you
all along.

Author’s Note

Eli was not written from a distance.
It was written from memory — not of events, but of feelings.

The innocence of early faith.
The slow drift into shadows.
The ache of wanting to return.
The surprise of being welcomed home.
The quiet shaping that follows restoration.

If you see yourself anywhere in these pages,
it is because Eli’s story is not just his.
It is the story of every heart that has ever wandered
and every heart the King has ever pursued.

My hope is simple:
that as you read, you hear the whisper Eli heard —
the whisper that changed everything:

“I never left.”

May that truth find you wherever you are,
and may it lead you home.

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Chapter One — The Boy Who Met the King

Eli was twelve the year everything began to change, though he didn't know it yet. At twelve, the world still felt wide and bright, full of hidden paths and secret meanings. He lived half in reality and half in imagination, and the line between the two was thin enough that he sometimes forgot which side he was standing on.

He remembered the King.

Not as a dream, not as a story, but as something that had truly happened — a moment from early childhood when he wandered into the woods behind his house and met Someone who felt more real than anything else in his small world. The memory had softened with time, like a photograph left in the sun, but it had never disappeared. It lived inside him like a warm ember.

Sometimes, when he was alone, he would close his eyes and try to recall the King's voice. It wasn't a sound exactly. More like a presence. A certainty. A knowing. It made him feel seen in a way nothing else did.

But childhood memories fade, and junior high was approaching like a storm front.

Eli felt it before he understood it — a shift in the air, a quiet pressure in his chest, a sense that the world was about to become more complicated than he was ready for. His parents said he was "growing up," but that phrase didn't capture the strange mixture of excitement and unease that followed him through the last weeks of summer.

He still spent afternoons exploring the woods, though he no longer expected the King to appear. He climbed rocks, followed deer trails, and imagined himself as a knight, a wanderer, a hero in a story only he could see. But even in those moments, something new tugged at the edges of his mind — a curiosity he couldn't name, a restlessness he didn't understand.

It wasn't troubling yet.
Just unfamiliar.

On the first day of seventh grade, Eli stood in the hallway of the school and felt small for the first time in his life. The building was loud, crowded, and full of faces he didn't recognize. Older students moved with a confidence he didn't have, laughing too loudly, talking too fast, carrying themselves like they knew secrets he wasn't supposed to hear.

Eli clutched his schedule and tried to blend in.

He wasn't afraid.
Just… unsettled.

The teachers were kind enough. The classes were manageable. But the atmosphere was different from anything he had known — sharper, heavier, filled with jokes he didn't understand and conversations that made him feel like he was always one step behind.

He noticed things.
The way boys whispered to each other with smirks.
The way girls rolled their eyes but seemed to know exactly what was happening.
The way certain words made everyone laugh, even though he didn't know why.

He pretended to laugh too.
It felt easier than asking.

That afternoon, walking home, Eli tried to shake off the feeling that something inside him had shifted. He couldn't explain it. He only knew that the world felt different now — less magical, more complicated.

He wondered what the King would say if He were walking beside him.

The thought surprised him.
He hadn't thought about the King in weeks.

For a moment, Eli slowed his steps and listened — really listened — the way he used to when he was younger. The wind moved through the trees. A car passed in the distance. A dog barked somewhere down the street.

But there was no whisper.
No presence.
No warmth.

Just silence.

Eli didn't know that this silence was the beginning of a long journey — a journey through curiosity, confusion, shame, and finally redemption. He didn't know that the King had not left him, not for a moment. He didn't know that the choices he would soon face would shape the rest of his life.

He only knew that he felt older than he had yesterday.
And that something inside him was beginning to wake.

Chapter Two — The First Doorway

Eli did not go looking for anything.

That is the part he would remember years later — the innocence of it, the ordinariness of the moment. He was twelve, still caught between childhood and whatever came next, still carrying the fading warmth of the King's presence somewhere deep inside him. Life was simple. Predictable. Safe.

Until the day it wasn't.

It happened on a rainy Saturday afternoon, the kind of day when the house felt too small and the hours stretched too long. His homework was finished. His parents were busy. The world outside was gray and dripping, and Eli sat at the family computer searching for pictures of knights for a school project.

He typed a word.
Then another.
Then a third.

He didn't know which one opened the wrong door.

But suddenly, there it was — something he had never seen before, something he wasn't ready for, something that made his stomach twist and his heart pound in a way he didn't understand.

He froze.

He knew he should click away.
He knew it wasn't right.
He knew the King would not want him to look.

But something inside him — something new, something sharp — whispered:

Stay.

It wasn't the King's whisper.
It wasn't warm or gentle.
It was electric, confusing, frightening, and strangely thrilling.

Eli clicked again.

Just once.

Just to see.

And that was enough.

A door had opened — a door he didn't know existed, a door he didn't know how to close. The image burned into his mind, not visually, but emotionally — a feeling he couldn't name, a pull he didn't understand.

When he finally shut the browser, his hands were shaking.
He felt hot and cold at the same time.
Excited and ashamed.
Curious and terrified.

He didn't tell anyone.
He didn't pray.
He didn't reach for the old books about the King.

He just sat there, staring at the blank screen, feeling as though he had swallowed something that didn't belong inside him.

That night, lying in bed, he tried to forget.
He tried to think about knights and dragons and the King who once walked beside him in the woods.

But the new images — the ones he didn't understand — pushed their way into his thoughts.

And when the whisper came — the soft, familiar whisper of the King — Eli turned his face toward the wall and pretended not to hear.

Not because he didn't love the King.
Not because he wanted to turn away.
But because he was afraid.

Afraid the King had seen.
Afraid the King was disappointed.
Afraid the King would not call his name again.

He didn't know it yet, but the King had not turned away.
The King never turns away.

But Eli's heart had taken its first step down a path that would lead him far from the light — a path paved not with wickedness, but with confusion, curiosity, and the quiet lies of the evil one:

"This is harmless."
"Everyone does it."
"You can stop anytime."
"No one will ever know."

Eli believed them.
Just for a moment.

But sometimes a moment is all it takes.

Chapter Three — The Quiet Descent

Eli did not return to the doorway right away.

For a few days, he tried to pretend nothing had happened. He went to school, did his homework, laughed at jokes he didn't understand, and played video games with the same friends who had no idea that something inside him had shifted.

But the memory of that moment — the thrill, the confusion, the strange electricity — stayed with him like a spark trapped under his ribs.

He didn't want it there.
He didn't ask for it.
But it stayed.

And the whisper — the wrong whisper — returned.

Not loudly.
Not insistently.
Just enough to make him wonder.

"It wasn't that bad."
"You didn't do anything wrong."
"You're just curious."
"Everyone your age looks."

He didn't know these were lies.
He only knew they felt comforting.

The King's whisper, by contrast, felt distant — not gone, but quiet, like a voice calling from far down a long hallway. Eli didn't turn toward it. He didn't reject it either. He simply… avoided it.

Avoidance is often the first step away from the light.

The Second Doorway

It happened a week later.

He was alone again — not because he planned it, but because life simply arranged itself that way. His parents were out. The house was still. The computer screen glowed softly in the dim room.

He sat down without thinking.
Or maybe he thought too much.

He told himself he was just going to check his email.
Just going to look up something for school.
Just going to pass the time.

But the whisper came again.

“Just one more look.”

His heart beat faster.
His palms grew warm.
His mind felt foggy, like he was standing in a dream.

He clicked.

And the door opened again.

This time, he didn’t freeze.
This time, he didn’t hesitate.
This time, he didn’t feel afraid — not at first.

He felt the thrill.
The rush.
The strange sense of being pulled toward something powerful.

But when it was over — when the screen went dark and the room felt cold — the emptiness came.

A heavy, sinking emptiness.

He sat there for a long time, staring at nothing, feeling as though he had stepped into a shadow he couldn’t name.

He whispered to himself, “I won’t do it again.”

He meant it.
He truly did.

But the whisper — the wrong whisper — answered:

“You will.”

The First Secret

That night, Eli lay in bed staring at the ceiling.
He felt different.
Older, but not in a good way.

He wanted to pray.
He wanted to reach for the King.
He wanted to feel the warmth he remembered from childhood.

But when he tried to pray, the words stuck in his throat.

He felt unworthy.
Unclean.
Afraid.

So he said nothing.

He kept the secret inside him, tucked away like a stone in his pocket — small, heavy, and impossible to ignore.

He didn't know it yet, but this was the beginning of the cycle:

- the thrill
- the emptiness
- the shame
- the silence

A cycle that would tighten around him in the years to come.

But for now, he was just a boy lying awake in the dark, wishing he could hear the King's whisper again.

He didn't know the King was still whispering.
He didn't know the King had not turned away.
He didn't know the King was closer than his breath.

He only knew that he felt alone.

And that the shadow inside him had grown just a little darker.

Chapter Four — The Fading Whisper

By the time Eli turned thirteen, the shadow inside him had settled into something familiar. Not comfortable — never that — but familiar enough that he no longer questioned its presence. It followed him through school hallways, into classrooms, onto the bus, and back home again. It lived in the quiet spaces of his mind, waiting.

He didn't think of it as a problem.
He didn't think of it as danger.
He didn't think of it as sin.

He thought of it as *his* — a secret he carried like a stone in his pocket, heavy but hidden.

The King's whisper still came sometimes, soft and patient, like a gentle breeze brushing past his ear. But Eli had grown skilled at ignoring it. Not out of rebellion. Not out of anger. Simply out of shame.

Shame teaches the heart to hide.

The Drift

Eli's days looked normal from the outside.

He went to school.
He did his homework.
He played video games.
He laughed with friends.

But inside, something was drifting.

He felt less connected to people.
Less interested in the things he used to love.
Less alive.

He didn't notice the change at first.
It was too gradual, too quiet.

He only knew that the world felt dimmer than it used to.

The woods behind his house — once a place of wonder — now felt ordinary.
The stories he used to imagine — knights, quests, the King — felt childish.
The books written about him sat untouched on the shelf, gathering dust.

He told himself he was "growing up."
He told himself this was normal.
He told himself he didn't need the King anymore.

But late at night, when the house was silent and the glow of the screen faded, he felt the emptiness settle over him like a cold blanket.

And he wondered why he felt so alone.

The Third Doorway

It happened on a weekday afternoon.

He wasn’t looking for anything.
He wasn’t planning anything.
He wasn’t even thinking about the shadow.

He was bored.

And boredom is often the doorway the enemy uses.

He clicked.
He scrolled.
He wandered.

And the whisper came again — smooth, familiar, persuasive:

“Just a little.
Just for a moment.
You deserve this.”

He didn’t resist.
He didn’t pause.
He didn’t pray.

He stepped through the doorway again.

And again.

And again.

Not for long.
Not obsessively.
Just enough to feel the thrill.
Just enough to feel the emptiness.
Just enough to feel the shame.

The cycle tightened.

The Silence

That night, Eli tried to pray.

He lay in bed staring at the ceiling, the room dark except for the faint glow of the streetlight outside. He whispered the King’s name — not loudly, not confidently, but with the fragile hope that maybe, just maybe, the King would answer.

Nothing.

Or at least, that's how it felt.

The truth was that the King *did* whisper.
He whispered Eli's name with love.
He whispered with longing.
He whispered with patience.

But Eli's heart was too full of noise to hear Him.

The wrong whisper — the whisper of the shadow — had grown louder.
And Eli believed it more than he believed the King.

He rolled onto his side and pulled the blanket over his head, trying to hide from the ache inside him.

He didn't know that the King was sitting beside him, unseen, unthanked, unacknowledged — watching His beloved child drift further into the fog.

He didn't know that the King's heart was breaking.
Not because Eli had sinned,
but because Eli was hurting.

He didn't know that the King was already planning the moment of rescue — the moment when Eli would remember who he was.

He only knew that he felt far from the light.

And that the whisper of the King was fading.

Chapter Five — The Hollow Places

By fourteen, Eli had learned how to live two lives.

In one life — the one everyone could see — he was polite, quiet, dependable. Teachers liked him. Friends trusted him. His parents assumed he was simply "reserved," the kind of boy who kept his thoughts tucked neatly inside.

In the other life — the hidden one — he was unraveling.

Not dramatically.
Not visibly.
Just slowly, quietly, steadily.

Like a rope fraying one thread at a time.

The Growing Distance

Eli didn't notice when the distance between himself and the King became a canyon. It didn't happen in a single moment. It happened in dozens of small ones:

- the nights he chose the screen over prayer
- the mornings he avoided the mirror
- the afternoons he felt numb but didn't know why

He still believed in the King.
He still remembered the woods.
He still kept the old books on his shelf.

But he no longer reached for them.

He told himself he was busy.
He told himself he was tired.
He told himself he didn't need them anymore.

But the truth was simpler:
He didn't want to feel the ache of remembering who he used to be.

The Cycle Tightens

The shadow inside him had become a rhythm — predictable, suffocating, and strangely comforting.

It always followed the same pattern:

The pull.
A sudden urge, sharp and insistent.

The surrender.
A few clicks. A few moments. A rush that felt like stepping off a cliff.

The emptiness.
A hollow ache that settled in his chest like cold water.

The shame.
Heavy. Silent. Crushing.

The promise.
"I won't do it again."

And then, days later, the cycle would begin again.

He hated it.
He needed it.
He feared it.
He obeyed it.

He didn't know the word *addiction*.
He only knew he felt trapped.

The Mask

Eli became an expert at pretending.

He laughed at the right moments.
He answered questions in class.
He nodded when his parents asked if he was okay.

He wasn't lying.
He just wasn't telling the truth.

He didn't know how.

How do you explain a battle you don't understand?
How do you confess something you can't name?
How do you ask for help when you don't believe you deserve it?

So he wore the mask.

And no one noticed the cracks forming underneath.

The Numbness

By fifteen, the numbness had settled in.

He didn't feel joy the way he used to.
He didn't feel wonder.
He didn't feel connected to anything.

Even the shadow — once thrilling — now felt mechanical, like a habit performed out of muscle memory rather than desire.

He wasn't chasing pleasure anymore.
He was chasing relief.

Relief from the ache.
Relief from the shame.
Relief from himself.

But the relief never lasted.

It was like drinking salt water — the more he consumed, the thirstier he became.

The Faint Whisper

Every now and then, the King's whisper would break through the fog.

Soft.
Gentle.
Patient.

"Eli…"

Just his name.
Nothing more.

But even that was enough to make his chest tighten.

He wanted to answer.
He wanted to turn back.
He wanted to feel the warmth he remembered from childhood.

But the shame was louder.

"You can't go back."
"You're too far gone."
"The King doesn't want you anymore."

He believed those lies more than he believed the truth.

So he stayed silent.

And the whisper faded again.

The Hollow Places

One night, after another cycle, Eli sat on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands. He felt hollow — not empty, but scraped out, like something inside him had been carved away.

He didn’t cry.
He didn’t pray.
He didn’t move.

He just sat there, breathing in the quiet darkness, wondering how he had become someone he didn’t recognize.

He didn’t know that the King was beside him.
He didn’t know that the King’s heart ached for him.
He didn’t know that the King was already preparing the moment of return.

He only knew that he felt lost.

And that the shadow inside him was no longer a visitor — it was a resident.

Chapter Six — The Breaking Point

Sixteen arrived not with celebration, but with a quiet heaviness Eli couldn’t explain. He wasn’t a child anymore — everyone reminded him of that — but he didn’t feel like an adult either. He felt like someone standing between two mirrors, seeing endless versions of himself and not recognizing any of them.

The shadow inside him had grown.
Not louder.
Not stronger.
Just… constant.

It no longer felt like a visitor.
It felt like part of him.

And that terrified him more than anything.

The Fracture

Eli’s friendships began to thin.

Not because anyone abandoned him, but because he slowly withdrew. He stopped going to gatherings. He stopped answering messages. He stopped laughing the way he used to.

People noticed, but no one pressed.

“Just teenage stuff,” they said.
“He’s introverted,” others shrugged.
“He’ll grow out of it.”

But Eli wasn’t growing out of anything.
He was sinking into something.

He felt fractured — like his soul had split into two pieces:

- the part everyone saw
- the part he couldn’t bear to face

The more he hid, the more the fracture widened.

The Weight of Shame

Shame had become his constant companion.

It followed him into classrooms, whispering that he was a fraud.
It followed him into conversations, insisting he didn’t belong.
It followed him into church, telling him he was unworthy to be there.

He believed it.

He believed it so deeply that he stopped praying altogether.
Not because he didn’t want God — but because he was convinced God didn’t want him.

He remembered the King’s face from childhood, the warmth, the kindness, the joy.
But now, when he imagined the King, he saw disappointment.

He didn’t know that this image was a lie.
He didn’t know the King’s heart had never changed.
He didn’t know the King still whispered his name with love.

He only knew he felt unclean.

And unclean things hide.

The Collapse

One night, after another cycle — the pull, the surrender, the emptiness — Eli sat on the floor of his room with his back against the bed. His chest felt tight. His breathing felt shallow. His thoughts felt heavy, like stones sinking in deep water.

He didn’t cry.
He didn’t move.
He didn’t speak.

He just sat there, staring at the wall, feeling like something inside him had finally cracked.

He whispered into the silence, “What’s wrong with me?”

The room didn’t answer.

But the King did.

Softly.
Gently.
Barely audible.

“Eli…”

Just his name.

But Eli flinched as though struck.

He didn’t want to hear it.
He didn’t want to feel it.
He didn’t want to be reminded of the One he believed he had disappointed beyond repair.

He covered his ears with his hands.

“Stop,” he whispered.
“Please… stop.”

But the King wasn’t scolding him.
The King wasn’t accusing him.
The King wasn’t condemning him.

The King was calling him home.

Eli couldn’t hear that yet.
Not through the noise of shame.
Not through the lies he believed.
Not through the weight crushing his spirit.

He only heard a voice he felt unworthy to answer.

The Numbness Deepens

In the weeks that followed, Eli drifted through life like a ghost.

He went to school.
He completed assignments.
He nodded when spoken to.
He smiled when expected.

But inside, he felt nothing.

Not joy.
Not hope.
Not even desire.

Just numbness.

The shadow no longer thrilled him.
It no longer excited him.
It no longer offered escape.

It simply kept him trapped.

He wasn't chasing pleasure anymore.
He was chasing relief from the ache of being himself.

And even that relief was fading.

The Whisper That Would Not Die

One night, lying awake in the dark, Eli felt the whisper again.

Not loud.
Not forceful.
Just present.

"Eli…"

He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Why won't You leave me alone?" he whispered.

But the King did not leave.
The King never leaves.
The King never abandons His beloved.

Eli didn't know it yet, but this whisper — this persistent, gentle whisper — was the thread that would one day pull him out of the darkness.

For now, he only felt the ache.

The ache of being known.
The ache of being loved.
The ache of being called.

And the ache of believing he didn't deserve any of it.

Chapter Seven — The Remembering

Eli was seventeen when the first crack of light returned.

It didn't come through a sermon.
It didn't come through a conversation.
It didn't come through guilt or fear or pressure.

It came through a memory.

A small one.
A quiet one.
A forgotten one.

But sometimes the smallest memories are the ones the King uses to open the heaviest doors.

The Books on the Shelf

It happened on a late autumn afternoon.

The sky outside was gray, the kind of gray that made the world feel tired. Eli had come home from school drained, numb, and carrying the familiar weight in his chest — the weight that had become his constant companion.

He dropped his backpack on the floor and collapsed onto his bed.
He didn't turn on the computer.
He didn't reach for his phone.
He didn't even turn on the light.

He just lay there, staring at the ceiling, feeling the ache of being himself.

After a long while, he sat up.
Not because he wanted to.
Because something inside him nudged him — gently, quietly, insistently.

His eyes drifted toward the bookshelf.

He hadn't touched those books in years.
He had forgotten they were even there.

But now, for reasons he couldn't explain, he felt drawn to them.

He stood.
He walked to the shelf.
He reached out.

His fingers brushed the spine of the first book:

The King Who Loves Me

He froze.

A warmth flickered in his chest — faint, fragile, but unmistakable.

He pulled the book down.

Then the second:

The Real King Loves Eli

Then the third:

The Boy Who Met the Real King

He held all three in his hands, and for the first time in years, he felt something other than shame.

He felt longing.

The First Page

He sat on the floor, legs crossed, the books spread out before him like relics from another life.

He opened the first one.

The handwriting was childish — uneven letters, crooked lines, misspelled words. He had written it when he was small, when the world was still full of wonder, when the King's voice had been as clear as sunlight.

He read the first sentence:

"The King loves me and He is my friend."

The words hit him like a blow.

He swallowed hard.
His eyes stung.
His chest tightened.

He turned the page.

"The King walks with me in the woods."

He remembered.
He remembered the warmth.
He remembered the presence.
He remembered the joy.

He remembered who he had been.

And who he had lost.

The Breaking

He opened the second book.

The handwriting was a little older, a little steadier. He had written it after the second encounter with the King — the one that had filled him with courage and wonder.

He read:

"The Real King loves Eli. He said my name."

Eli's breath caught.

He whispered into the empty room, "He said my name…"

He opened the third book.

This one was written with the confidence of a boy who believed he would never forget the King's voice.

"I met the Real King. He knows me."

That was the moment the dam broke.

Tears spilled down Eli's face — not quiet tears, not controlled tears, but deep, shaking sobs that came from a place he had buried for years.

He pressed his hands to his face and wept.

He wept for the boy he used to be.
He wept for the years he had lost.
He wept for the lies he had believed.
He wept for the distance he had created.
He wept because he missed the King.

He wept because he wanted to go home.

The Whisper Returns

In the middle of his sobbing — in the middle of the shaking, the gasping, the breaking — he heard it.

Soft.
Gentle.
Familiar.

"Eli…"

Just his name.

But this time, he didn't flinch.
He didn't hide.
He didn't cover his ears.

He lifted his face, tears streaming, and whispered back:

"Please… don't leave me."

And the whisper answered:

"I never left."

Eli's sobs deepened — not from despair, but from relief so overwhelming it felt like his heart might burst.

The King had not abandoned him.
The King had not turned away.
The King had not stopped loving him.

The King had been waiting.

Patiently.
Tenderly.
Faithfully.

Waiting for this moment.

Waiting for Eli to remember.

The Turning Begins

Eli didn't know what came next.
He didn't know how to change.
He didn't know how to heal.
He didn't know how to break the chains that held him.

But for the first time in years, he felt hope.

Small.
Fragile.
But real.

He gathered the three books into his arms and held them against his chest.

He whispered, "Help me."

And the King whispered back:

"I will."

The turning had begun.

Chapter Eight — The Return of the King

Eli didn't sleep that night.

After the tears, after the breaking, after the remembering, he sat on the floor with the three books beside him, feeling as though the world had shifted beneath his feet. Something inside him — something long buried — had awakened.

Not fully.
Not brightly.
But unmistakably.

Hope.

Small, trembling, fragile hope.

He didn’t know what to do with it.
He only knew he didn’t want to lose it again.

The Confession Begins

The next morning, Eli woke with swollen eyes and a sore throat. He felt raw, scraped open, exposed. But he also felt lighter — as though a weight he had carried for years had loosened its grip.

He sat on the edge of his bed, the books still on the floor where he had left them.

He whispered, “King… I don’t know how to do this.”

The whisper came immediately — gentle, warm, steady:

“Speak.”

Eli swallowed hard.

“I’m sorry.”

The words were small.
But they were real.

“I’m sorry for everything.
For turning away.
For hiding.
For choosing the shadow.
For forgetting You.”

His voice cracked.

“I didn’t want to forget You.”

The whisper answered:

“I never forgot you.”

Eli pressed a hand to his mouth as tears filled his eyes again — not the tears of despair this time, but the tears of someone who has been found.

The King Draws Near

Eli closed his eyes.

And in the quiet of his room — in the stillness of that early morning — he felt it.

A presence.

Not imagined.
Not remembered.
Not hoped for.

Real.

Warm.
Near.
Familiar.

The same presence he had felt in the woods as a child.
The same presence that had whispered his name through the years of darkness.
The same presence that had waited for him with unchanging love.

He didn't see the King with his eyes.
But he felt Him.

Closer than breath.
Closer than heartbeat.
Closer than shame.

Eli whispered, "Why didn't You leave me?"

The answer came like sunlight breaking through clouds:

"Because you are Mine."

The Repentance

Eli knelt on the floor.

Not because he thought he had to.
Not because he feared punishment.
But because his heart could no longer stand under the weight of grace.

He confessed everything.

Not in detail — the King already knew.
Not in fear — the King was not angry.
Not in despair — the King had already come to him.

He confessed because he wanted to be clean.

He confessed because he wanted to be free.

He confessed because he wanted the King more than he wanted the shadow.

When he finished, he whispered, “Can You forgive me?”

The answer came without hesitation:

“I already have.”

Eli’s breath caught.

He felt something break — not painfully, but beautifully.
Like chains snapping.
Like a door unlocking.
Like a heart being made new.

The Embrace

Eli didn’t see the King’s arms around him.
But he felt them.

He felt held.
He felt safe.
He felt loved.

Loved not despite his failure,
but through it.

Loved not because he was worthy,
but because the King was merciful.

Loved not because he had returned,
but because the King had never left.

Eli wept again — but these were tears of release, of relief, of rebirth.

The King whispered:

“Eli, My beloved…
you are home.”

The New Beginning

When the embrace faded, Eli sat quietly, breathing slowly, feeling the warmth linger in his chest.

He wasn't healed completely.
He wasn't free instantly.
He wasn't transformed in a single moment.

But he was no longer alone.

He was no longer ashamed.
He was no longer abandoned.
He was no longer lost.

He had turned.
And the King had met him in the turning.

Eli looked at the three books on the floor and whispered:

"Thank You."

And the whisper answered:

"Walk with Me."

Eli nodded.

For the first time in years, he felt like he could.

Chapter Nine — Learning to Walk Again

Eli woke the next morning with a strange mixture of peace and fear.
Peace — because the King had met him.
Fear — because he didn't know how to live differently.

Repentance had broken the chains, yes.
But freedom was something he would have to learn.

He sat on the edge of his bed, the three books still stacked neatly beside him. Sunlight filtered through the curtains, soft and warm, and for the first time in years, he didn't shrink from the light.

He whispered, "I want to be new."

And the whisper answered:

"Walk with Me."

The First Steps

Eli didn't know what "walking with the King" meant anymore.
Not practically.
Not daily.
Not in the quiet moments when temptation returned like an echo.

But he tried.

He opened the first book again — *The King Who Loves Me* — and read it slowly, letting the childlike truth sink into the places that had grown hard.

He prayed — awkwardly, haltingly, honestly.

He didn't use fancy words.
He didn't try to impress the King.
He simply spoke.

"Help me today."
"Stay close."
"Don't let me fall again."

And the whisper came, steady and sure:

"I am here."

It wasn't dramatic.
It wasn't emotional.
It was steady.

And steady was enough.

The Return of Color

Over the next weeks, something unexpected happened.

Life began to regain color.

Not all at once.
Not brightly.
But gradually — like dawn spreading across a dark horizon.

He noticed the woods again.
The way the leaves shimmered in the wind.

The way sunlight danced on the creek.
The way silence felt peaceful instead of threatening.

He noticed people again.
Their faces.
Their stories.
Their humanity.

He no longer saw them through the fog of the shadow.
He saw them as souls.

And that alone felt like a miracle.

The Battle Isn't Over

Freedom didn't mean the shadow disappeared.

Some days were easy.
Some days were hard.
Some days the old whisper returned with sharp clarity:

"Just once."
"You're still the same."
"You'll never change."

But now Eli had something he didn't have before.

He had the King's voice.

Not distant.
Not faint.
Not fading.

Present.

"Eli, look at Me."

And when he did — when he turned his face toward the whisper of the King — the shadow lost its power.

Not instantly.
Not magically.
But truly.

Because the King's voice was stronger than the lies.

The New Heart

One evening, Eli sat on the porch steps, watching the sky turn gold and pink. He felt calm — not the numbness of before, but real calm, the kind that settles deep in the bones.

He whispered, "Thank You."

And the King whispered back:

"I am making you new."

Eli closed his eyes.

He didn't know what the future held.
He didn't know how many battles lay ahead.
He didn't know how long the journey would be.

But he knew this:

He was not alone.
He was not abandoned.
He was not the boy he used to be.

He was walking with the King again.

And that was enough.

Chapter Ten — The First Victory

Eli didn't notice the exact moment the change began.
It wasn't dramatic.
It wasn't loud.
It wasn't the kind of moment you write down in a journal.

It was quiet — the way dawn arrives before you realize the night is over.

He woke one morning and felt… steady.
Not perfect.
Not triumphant.
Just steady.

And for someone who had lived years in a storm, steadiness felt like a miracle.

The Day Without Shadows

It happened on a Tuesday.

A normal Tuesday.
A forgettable Tuesday.
The kind of day that usually slipped past him without meaning.

But this one was different.

He came home from school, dropped his backpack, and sat at his desk. The computer sat in front of him — the same screen that had been a doorway into darkness for so long.

He stared at it.

The old whisper came, soft and familiar:

"Just once."

But something inside him — something new, something alive — rose up.

Not fear.
Not shame.
Not willpower.

Presence.

The King's presence.

A whisper, warm and steady:

"Look at Me."

Eli closed his eyes.

He breathed.

He turned his heart toward the King.

And the shadow… passed.

Just like that.

Not because he fought it.
Not because he was strong.
But because he wasn't alone.

He whispered, “Thank You.”

And the King answered:

“Walk with Me.”

It was the first day in years that ended without regret.

The Strengthening

Over the next weeks, Eli noticed something he had never felt before:
strength.

Not the strength to resist temptation — that came later.
The strength to *turn*.

To turn his eyes.
To turn his thoughts.
To turn his heart.

Every time the old whisper returned, the King’s whisper met it:

“Eli, look at Me.”

And when he did, the shadow lost its grip.

He wasn’t perfect.
He wasn’t flawless.
He wasn’t suddenly immune.

But he was no longer powerless.

And that alone felt like freedom.

The Return of Joy

Joy came back slowly.

At first, it was small things:

- the way sunlight warmed his face
- the sound of leaves rustling in the woods
- the laughter of a friend
- the quiet peace of prayer

Then it grew.

He found himself humming again.
Smiling again.
Feeling again.

The numbness that had wrapped around his heart for years began to crack, letting light seep through.

He realized something astonishing:

He liked being alive again.

The King's Nearness

One evening, Eli sat on the back steps, watching the sky fade from gold to blue. He felt the King's presence beside him — not as a memory, not as a hope, but as a reality.

He whispered, "Why do You stay so close?"

The answer came like a gentle embrace:

"Because you are Mine."

Eli closed his eyes.

He didn't feel ashamed.
He didn't feel unworthy.
He didn't feel afraid.

He felt loved.

Deeply.
Steadily.
Unconditionally.

The First Victory

It wasn't the last battle.
It wasn't the end of temptation.
It wasn't the final chapter of his healing.

But it was the first victory.

The first day the shadow lost.
The first day the King's voice was louder.
The first day Eli realized he could walk in freedom.

He whispered into the quiet evening:

"I'm not who I was."

And the King whispered back:

"You are becoming who you were always meant to be."

Eli smiled.

For the first time in years, he believed it.

Chapter Eleven — The New Strength

Eli didn't become a different person overnight.
He didn't wake up one morning with every temptation gone, every shadow erased, every wound healed.
That isn't how the King works.
And deep down, Eli knew it.

But something *had* changed.

He was no longer fighting alone.

And that made all the difference.

The Quiet Confidence

Eli walked through his days with a new steadiness.
Not pride — he knew better than that.
Not perfection — he wasn't pretending anymore.
But confidence.

A quiet, humble confidence that came from knowing the King walked with him.

He felt it in the mornings when he prayed before school.
He felt it in the afternoons when he opened the old books again.
He felt it in the evenings when he sat on the porch and listened for the whisper.

And the whisper always came.

Not loud.
Not dramatic.
Just faithful.

“I am here.”

The Temptation That Returned

It happened on a Thursday.

A long day.
A stressful day.
A day when Eli felt tired, lonely, and vulnerable — the perfect conditions for the old whisper to return.

He sat at his desk, staring at the computer screen.
The familiar tug pulled at him — subtle, persistent, dangerous.

The old whisper rose:

“Just once.
You’ve been good.
You deserve this.”

For a moment, Eli froze.

The shadow felt close again.
Too close.

His heart pounded.
His palms grew warm.
His thoughts blurred.

But then —
before the old whisper could tighten its grip —
another voice broke through.

Soft.
Steady.
Strong.

“Eli, look at Me.”

He closed his eyes.

He breathed.

He turned his heart toward the King.

And the temptation… broke.

Not because Eli was strong.
But because the King was near.

Eli whispered, “Thank You.”

And the King answered:

“You are learning.”

The Restoration of Imagination

One of the first things the King restored was Eli’s imagination.

For years, it had been twisted, clouded, distorted by the shadow.
But now — slowly, gently — it began to heal.

He found himself daydreaming again.
Not about darkness.
Not about escape.
But about beauty.

He imagined the woods of his childhood.
He imagined the King walking beside him.
He imagined stories filled with light instead of shame.

His mind, once a battlefield, was becoming a garden again.

The Unexpected Conversation

One afternoon, Eli sat with a friend at lunch — someone he had known for years but never really talked to deeply. The friend looked tired, withdrawn, distracted.

Eli recognized the look.

He had worn it himself.

“Are you okay?” Eli asked — gently, without pressure.

The friend hesitated.
Then shrugged.
Then whispered, “I don’t know. I just… feel messed up.”

Eli didn’t preach.
He didn’t lecture.
He didn’t reveal his own story.

He simply said, “You’re not alone.”

The friend looked at him — really looked at him — and something softened in his eyes.

“Thanks,” he said quietly.

Eli didn’t realize it then, but this was the beginning of something new:
the King using him to bring light to others.

The King’s Promise

That night, Eli prayed again — not out of fear, not out of desperation, but out of gratitude.

“Thank You for staying,” he whispered.

And the King answered:

“I will never leave you.
And one day, you will help others find their way home.”

Eli felt warmth spread through his chest.

He didn’t know how.
He didn’t know when.
He didn’t know who.

But he believed the King.

For the first time in his life, he believed he had a purpose beyond his failures.

The New Strength

Eli lay in bed that night, staring at the ceiling, feeling a peace he had never known before.

He wasn’t perfect.
He wasn’t finished.
He wasn’t beyond struggle.

But he was strong.

Not because he had conquered the shadow,
but because the King walked with him through it.

He whispered into the quiet:

“I’m Yours.”

And the King whispered back:

“And I am yours.”

Eli smiled in the dark.

He was learning to walk.
He was learning to stand.
He was learning to live again.

And the King was teaching him every step of the way.

Chapter Twelve — Light for Another

Eli didn’t realize he was changing until other people began to notice.

It wasn’t dramatic.
It wasn’t loud.
It wasn’t the kind of transformation that made anyone stop and stare.

It was quieter than that — the kind of change that shows up in the eyes before it shows up anywhere else.

He carried peace now.
Not constant, not perfect, but real.
And real peace is hard to hide.

The Friend Who Was Fading

It started with the same friend from lunch — the one who had whispered, *“I just…feel messed up.”*

Over the next few weeks, Eli noticed things he hadn’t seen before:

- the way his friend's shoulders slumped
- the way he avoided eye contact
- the way he laughed at jokes without really laughing
- the way he seemed to be shrinking into himself

Eli recognized the signs.
He had lived them.

One afternoon, as they walked home together, the friend kicked a stone down the sidewalk and muttered, "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Eli didn't rush.
He didn't pry.
He didn't push.

He simply said, "You can talk to me if you want."

The friend hesitated.
Then nodded — barely.

"Maybe later."

Eli nodded back.

"Whenever you're ready."

He didn't realize it, but the King was already working through him.

The Conversation That Changed Everything

"Can I tell you something?" the friend asked a week later.

They were sitting under a tree behind the school, the late afternoon sun casting long shadows across the grass.

Eli nodded.

The friend took a shaky breath.

"I think I'm stuck in something. Something I can't get out of."

Eli's heart tightened.

He didn't ask what it was.
He didn't need to.

He simply said, "I understand."

The friend looked at him — surprised, relieved, afraid.

“You do?”

Eli nodded again.

“I’ve been stuck too.”

He didn’t go into detail.
He didn’t confess his entire story.
He didn’t make it about himself.

He just opened a door.

The friend swallowed hard.

“I feel like I’m drowning.”

Eli felt the King’s whisper rise inside him:

“Speak hope.”

So he did.

“You’re not drowning. You’re hurting. And you’re not alone.”

The friend’s eyes filled with tears — not dramatic tears, not loud tears, but the quiet kind that come from someone who hasn’t felt understood in a long time.

“Does it get better?” he whispered.

Eli breathed in slowly.

“Yes,” he said. “It does. Not all at once. But it does.”

The friend nodded, wiping his eyes.

“Can you… help me?”

Eli felt something warm settle in his chest — not pride, not pressure, but purpose.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I can walk with you.”

And the King whispered:

“As I walk with you.”

The Beginning of Ministry

Eli didn't think of it as ministry.
He didn't think of himself as a guide or a mentor or anything important.

He just thought of himself as someone who had been rescued — and who now wanted to help someone else find the same rescue.

He didn't preach.
He didn't lecture.
He didn't pretend to have all the answers.

He simply shared what he had learned:

- that shame lies
- that darkness isolates
- that the King never leaves
- that healing is slow but real
- that freedom is possible

And his friend listened.

Really listened.

Because Eli wasn't speaking from theory.
He was speaking from scars.

The King's Joy

One evening, after another long conversation with his friend, Eli walked home feeling strangely full — not heavy, not burdened, but full.

He whispered, "Why does helping him feel so… right?"

And the King answered:

"Because love heals the giver as much as the receiver."

Eli felt tears prick his eyes.

He had spent years believing he was broken beyond usefulness.
Years believing he was unworthy of love.
Years believing he had nothing to offer.

But now —
now he saw the truth:

The King had not only restored him.
The King was using him.

Not despite his past.
But through it.

The New Calling

That night, Eli sat on his bed with the three books beside him.
He opened the first one — *The King Who Loves Me* — and traced the childish handwriting with his finger.

He whispered, "Thank You for finding me."

And the King whispered back:

"Now help Me find others."

Eli closed his eyes.

He didn't know what that meant.
He didn't know where it would lead.
He didn't know how far the calling would reach.

But he knew this:

He was ready.

For the first time in his life, he was ready.

Chapter Thirteen — Becoming Who He Is

Eli didn't notice the moment he crossed from healing into growth.
Healing had been about survival — about learning to breathe again, to hope again, to trust again.
Growth was different.
Growth was about becoming.

And the King was leading him into it, step by steady step.

The Strength That Stayed

By eighteen, Eli carried himself differently.

Not with swagger.
Not with pride.
But with a quiet steadiness that came from walking daily with the King.

He woke each morning with purpose.
He prayed not out of fear, but out of desire.
He read the old books not out of nostalgia, but out of hunger.

The King's whisper was no longer faint.
It was near.
It was constant.
It was home.

"Eli, walk with Me."

And Eli did.

Not perfectly.
Not flawlessly.
But faithfully.

The Friend Who Returned

One afternoon, the friend he had been helping knocked on his door.

Eli opened it to find him standing there, eyes red, shoulders tense, hands shaking slightly.

"Can we talk?" the friend asked.

Eli nodded and stepped aside.

They sat on the edge of Eli's bed, the room quiet except for the soft hum of the fan in the corner.

The friend took a deep breath.

"I messed up," he whispered.

Eli didn't flinch.
He didn't sigh.
He didn't judge.

He simply said, "Tell me."

The friend explained — haltingly, painfully — how he had fallen back into the same cycle, how he felt like a failure, how he feared he had disappointed God beyond repair.

Eli listened.

Really listened.

And when the friend finished, Eli spoke with a calm he didn't know he possessed.

"You didn't surprise the King," he said softly. "He knew every step you'd take. And He hasn't changed His mind about you."

The friend's eyes filled with tears.

"Then why do I feel so far away?"

Eli smiled gently.

"Because shame lies. But the King doesn't."

The friend let out a shaky breath.

"Can you pray with me?"

Eli nodded.

And as they bowed their heads, Eli felt the King's presence settle around them like warm light.

"This is who you are becoming," the King whispered.
"A bringer of light."

The New Identity

In the weeks that followed, Eli found himself stepping into a role he never expected:

- encourager
- listener
- guide
- friend

Not because he was perfect.
Not because he was wise.
But because he understood.

He understood darkness.
He understood shame.
He understood the ache of wanting to be free.

And he understood the King.

He understood the patience.
The mercy.
The relentless love.

He understood that the King never gives up on His children — not even when they give up on themselves.

The King's Invitation

One evening, Eli walked into the woods behind his house — the same woods where he had met the King as a child.

The air was cool.
The leaves whispered overhead.
The path felt familiar beneath his feet.

He stopped at the clearing — the clearing where everything had begun.

He closed his eyes.

And the King came.

Not in a vision.
Not in a blaze of glory.
But in presence.

Warm.
Near.
Real.

"Eli," the King whispered.

Eli swallowed hard.

"Yes?"

"You are becoming who I made you to be."

Eli felt tears gather in his eyes.

"Who is that?" he whispered.

The answer came like a sunrise:

“A man of light.
A man of mercy.
A man who knows My heart.”

Eli bowed his head.

“I’m not finished.”

“No,” the King said gently.
“But you are Mine. And that is enough.”

The Becoming

Eli walked home slowly, the evening sky glowing orange and gold.
He felt the King’s presence beside him with every step.

He wasn’t the boy he used to be.
He wasn’t the broken teenager he had become.
He wasn’t the man he would one day be.

He was becoming.

And the King was shaping him — not through perfection, but through love.

When he reached his house, he paused at the door and whispered:

“Thank You for not giving up on me.”

And the King whispered back:

“I never will.”

Eli smiled.

He believed it.

Chapter Fourteen — The Calling of the Heart

Eli didn’t know that a calling could begin quietly.
He had always imagined it as something dramatic — a voice from the sky, a moment of revelation, a sudden surge of purpose.
But the King rarely works that way.

Callings often begin as a whisper.
A nudge.
A stirring.

And that was exactly how it began for him.

The Stirring Within

It started one morning as Eli walked to school, the early sun warming the pavement beneath his feet. He felt a pull inside him — not toward temptation, not toward fear, but toward something deeper.

A desire to help.
A desire to heal.
A desire to bring light.

He didn't understand it yet.
He only knew that something inside him was changing shape.

The King whispered:

"Eli, there is more."

Eli swallowed.

"More of what?"

"More of Me."

The words settled into him like seeds.

The Friend Who Needed Hope

At lunch that day, his friend — the one he had been walking with — sat across from him, looking worn and defeated.

Eli recognized the look.
He had lived it.

"You okay?" Eli asked gently.

The friend hesitated, then shook his head.

"I messed up again."

Eli didn't sigh.
He didn't judge.
He didn't retreat.

He leaned forward.

"Then we start again."

The friend blinked.

"That's it?"

Eli nodded.

"That's it."

The friend exhaled, relief softening his shoulders.

Eli felt the King whisper:

"This is My work."

And Eli believed it.

The Unexpected Invitation

A week later, Eli's youth leader approached him after a small group meeting.

"Hey, Eli," he said, "I've noticed something different about you lately."

Eli stiffened, unsure what that meant.

But the leader smiled warmly.

"You've got a steadiness about you. A kindness. The younger guys look up to you."

Eli felt heat rise in his cheeks.

"I… I don't know about that."

The leader chuckled.

"Well, I do. And I was wondering if you'd help me with something. A few of the younger boys are struggling. They need someone to talk to. Someone who understands."

Eli's heart pounded.

He understood.
More than anyone knew.

He swallowed.

“What would I have to do?”

“Just be yourself,” the leader said. “And be present.”

Eli hesitated.

Then nodded.

“Okay.”

The leader clapped him on the shoulder.

“I knew you’d say yes.”

As he walked home that evening, Eli felt the King’s presence beside him.

“You are stepping into who you are.”

The First Meeting

The following week, Eli sat in a small room at the church with two younger boys — both nervous, both quiet, both carrying shadows they didn’t know how to name.

Eli didn’t lecture.
He didn’t preach.
He didn’t pretend to be wise.

He simply said:

“I’ve been where you are.”

The boys looked up — surprised, relieved, hopeful.

Eli continued:

“You’re not broken. You’re not alone. And the King hasn’t given up on you.”

One of the boys whispered, “Do you really believe that?”

Eli smiled softly.

“I don’t just believe it. I’ve lived it.”

And in that moment, something clicked inside him — something that felt like purpose settling into place.

The King whispered:

"This is your calling."

The Weight and the Wonder

That night, Eli sat on his bed, the three childhood books beside him as always. He opened the third one — *The Boy Who Met the Real King* — and traced the words with his finger.

He whispered, "Why me?"

The King answered:

"Because you know the darkness.
And you know the way out.
And you know My heart."

Eli felt tears gather in his eyes.

"I'm not perfect."

"I never asked you to be."

"I'm still learning."

"Then teach from what you know."

"I'm afraid sometimes."

"Then lean on Me."

Eli closed the book and pressed it to his chest.

He understood now.

His story wasn't just about his fall.
It wasn't just about his return.
It wasn't even just about his healing.

It was about his calling.

A calling to walk with the King —
and to help others find Him.

Becoming the Light

Eli stood at his window, looking out at the quiet street below.
He felt the King's presence behind him — steady, warm, unwavering.

He whispered, "I'll go where You lead."

And the King whispered back:

"Then you will shine."

Eli breathed deeply.

He wasn't the boy he used to be.
He wasn't the broken teenager he had been.
He wasn't the man he would one day become.

He was the light-bearer the King was shaping.

And he was ready.

Chapter Fifteen — The Test of the Heart

Eli had always imagined that once he stepped into his calling, the path would grow easier.
Clearer.
Straighter.
Brighter.

But the King knew better.
Growth requires testing.
Strength requires resistance.
Light requires darkness to reveal its glow.

And so the test came — not as an attack, but as an invitation to become who he truly was.

The Boy in the Corner

It happened on a Wednesday evening at youth group.

Eli arrived early, helping set up chairs and straighten the room. He felt calm, steady, ready to serve. The King's presence was warm around him, like sunlight resting on his shoulders.

As the younger boys filed in, Eli noticed one he had never seen before — a small, thin boy with dark hair that fell over his eyes. He sat alone in the corner, knees pulled to his chest, staring at the floor.

Eli felt a tug in his spirit.

A whisper:

"Go to him."

Eli hesitated.

He didn't know the boy.
He didn't know his story.
He didn't know what to say.

But the whisper came again:

"Go."

So Eli crossed the room and sat down beside him — not close enough to overwhelm, but close enough to be present.

"Hey," Eli said softly. "I'm Eli."

The boy didn't look up.

After a long moment, he whispered, "I shouldn't be here."

Eli's heart tightened.

"Why not?"

The boy swallowed hard.

"Because I'm… messed up."

Eli breathed slowly.

He had heard those words before — from his friend, from others, from himself.

He said gently, "You're not messed up. You're hurting."

The boy's shoulders shook.

And Eli knew:
This was the test.

The Story That Broke Him

After the meeting ended, the boy lingered.
Eli stayed with him.

They sat on the steps outside the church, the evening air cool and quiet.

The boy finally spoke.

“I did something bad,” he whispered. “Something I can’t stop. Something that makes me feel dirty.”

Eli didn’t flinch.
He didn’t judge.
He didn’t retreat.

He simply said, “I understand.”

The boy looked up — startled, desperate.

“You do?”

Eli nodded.

“I’ve been where you are.”

The boy’s eyes filled with tears.

“I feel like God hates me.”

Eli shook his head.

“No. He doesn’t hate you. He’s calling you.”

The boy’s voice cracked.

“But I can’t stop.”

Eli felt the King’s whisper rise inside him:

“Tell him the truth.”

So Eli did.

“You can’t stop alone,” he said softly. “But you’re not alone anymore.”

The boy covered his face with his hands and sobbed — the deep, shaking sobs of someone who has carried shame far too long.

Eli placed a hand on his shoulder.

And the King whispered:

“This is My work. Keep going.”

The Temptation in the Night

That night, after helping the boy, Eli walked home feeling both full and fragile.

He had poured out so much.
He had carried someone else’s pain.
He had spoken truth with trembling courage.

And the enemy saw an opening.

When Eli entered his room, the old whisper rose — sharp, sudden, familiar:

“You helped someone. You deserve a break. Just once.”

Eli froze.

The temptation hit harder than it had in months — not because he was weak, but because he had stepped into the light.

The shadow always fights hardest when it is losing.

His heart pounded.
His mind blurred.
His hands trembled.

The old doorway felt close again.

Too close.

He whispered, “King… help me.”

And the answer came instantly:

“Look at Me.”

Eli closed his eyes.

He breathed.

He turned his heart toward the King.

And the temptation shattered like glass.

Not because Eli was strong.
But because the King was.

Eli sank to his knees, trembling with relief.

"Thank You," he whispered.

And the King answered:

"This is what strength looks like."

The Joy of Obedience

The next day, Eli met with the boy again.
They talked.
They prayed.
They walked together.

And Eli realized something profound:

Helping others didn't drain him.
It filled him.

Not with pride.
Not with self-importance.
But with joy.

The joy of obedience.
The joy of purpose.
The joy of walking in the King's calling.

That evening, Eli sat on his porch steps, watching the sky fade into twilight.

He whispered, "I didn't think I could do this."

And the King whispered back:

"You're not doing it alone."

Eli smiled.

He believed it.

The Test Passed

Eli wasn't perfect.
He wasn't finished.
He wasn't beyond struggle.

But he had faced temptation — and chosen the King.
He had faced someone else's darkness — and brought light.
He had faced his calling — and stepped into it.

He whispered into the quiet:

"I want to keep walking with You."

And the King whispered:

"Then keep your eyes on Me."

Eli nodded.

He would.

He was becoming the man the King had always seen in him.

Chapter Sixteen — The Deep Waters

Eli was nineteen when the King led him into deeper waters.

Not darker waters — those days were behind him.
Not calmer waters — growth is rarely calm.
But deeper waters, where faith becomes more than rescue,
and calling becomes more than compassion.

This was the season where Eli learned what it meant to **abide**.

Not visit.
Not return to.
Abide.

Live.
Dwell.
Remain.

And the King was ready to teach him.

The Season of Stretching

Eli's life had grown full.

He was helping younger boys at church.
He was supporting his friend through recovery.
He was studying, working, praying, walking with the King daily.

But fullness is not the same as maturity.

And the King wanted more for him.

One morning, as Eli sat with his Bible open and the three childhood books beside him, he felt the whisper:

"Eli, it is time to grow deeper."

Eli frowned slightly.

"I thought I was growing."

"You are. But now you must grow roots."

The words settled into him like a weight — not heavy, but meaningful.

Roots meant stability.
Roots meant endurance.
Roots meant storms.

Eli swallowed.

"I'm ready."

The King whispered:

"Then follow Me."

The Unexpected Burden

A few weeks later, Eli noticed something new — a heaviness in his spirit that didn't feel like shame or fear. It felt like compassion sharpened into urgency.

He found himself thinking about people he barely knew:

- a quiet boy who always sat alone

- a girl who never spoke in small group
- a classmate who hid behind sarcasm
- a neighbor who seemed weighed down by life

He didn't know why these people came to mind.
He didn't know what he was supposed to do.

But the King whispered:

"Pray for them."

So he did.

Every day.
Every night.
Every time the burden returned.

And something remarkable happened:

The more he prayed,
the more he loved them.

Not with his own love —
but with the King's.

The Night of Wrestling

One evening, Eli sat on his bed, feeling the weight of the burden pressing on him. He didn't understand it. He didn't know what the King was doing. He didn't know why he felt so deeply for people he barely knew.

He whispered, "Why are You giving me this?"

The King answered:

"Because you asked to grow."

Eli exhaled slowly.

"But it hurts."

"Love always does."

Eli bowed his head.

"I don't know if I'm strong enough."

The King whispered:

“You are not. But I am.”

Eli felt tears gather in his eyes.

“Then help me.”

“I already am.”

The First Breakthrough

A few days later, one of the boys he had been praying for approached him after youth group.

“Eli… can I talk to you?”

Eli nodded.

They stepped outside into the cool evening air.

The boy hesitated, then whispered, “I don’t know why, but… I feel like I’m supposed to talk to you.”

Eli felt the King’s presence settle around them.

The boy continued, voice trembling:

“I’m scared. I feel lost. And I don’t know who to tell.”

Eli swallowed.

This was the burden.
This was the reason.
This was the deeper water.

He placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“You’re not alone,” he said softly. “And you’re not lost. The King is calling you.”

The boy’s eyes filled with tears.

“Can you help me?”

Eli nodded.

“Yes. I can walk with you.”

And the King whispered:

“This is the fruit of your prayers.”

The Deepening of Calling

Over the next months, Eli found himself walking with more and more people — not because he sought them out, but because they were drawn to him.

Not to his strength.
Not to his wisdom.
But to the King’s presence in him.

He became:

- a listener
- a comforter
- a guide
- a brother
- a light

And with every conversation, every prayer, every moment of compassion, Eli felt the King shaping him.

Not into a leader of crowds.
Not into a preacher of sermons.
But into a shepherd of hearts.

A man who carried the King’s love into the quiet places.

The Whisper of Identity

One night, after a long day of helping others, Eli sat alone in his room. He felt tired — not spiritually, but physically, emotionally, humanly tired.

He whispered, “Am I doing enough?”

The King answered:

“You are doing what I ask.”

Eli nodded slowly.

“But who am I becoming?”

The answer came like a warm wind:

“A man after My heart.”

Eli closed his eyes.

He didn’t feel worthy of that.
He didn’t feel ready for that.
He didn’t feel capable of that.

But he believed the King.

And that belief was enough.

Chapter Seventeen — The Storm That Reveals

Eli had known seasons of darkness.
He had known seasons of healing.
He had known seasons of growth.

But he had never known a storm like this one.

This was not a storm of temptation.
Not a storm of shame.
Not a storm of personal weakness.

This was a storm of **calling** —
the kind that tests not the wounds of the past,
but the strength of the present.

And the King was not absent.
He was leading Eli straight into it.

The Crisis No One Expected

It began with the boy he had been helping — the quiet one, the hurting one, the one who had finally begun to open his heart.

One evening, Eli received a message:

“I messed up. Bad. I don’t know what to do.”

Eli’s chest tightened.

He hurried to the church, where the boy waited on the steps, shaking, eyes red, breath shallow.

“What happened?” Eli asked gently.

The boy swallowed hard.

“I told my parents everything. They… didn’t take it well.”

Eli sat beside him.

“What did they say?”

The boy’s voice cracked.

“They said I’m disgusting. That God is ashamed of me. That I’m broken beyond fixing.”

Eli felt something inside him ignite — not anger at the boy, but a fierce, protective compassion.

He whispered, “That is not the King’s voice.”

The boy sobbed.

“I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

Eli placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Then believe this: the King is not ashamed of you. He is calling you.”

The boy leaned into him, trembling.

And Eli felt the King whisper:

“This is the storm. Stand firm.”

The Weight of Another’s Pain

For the next hour, Eli listened.
He prayed.
He comforted.
He spoke truth into the boy’s shattered heart.

But when the boy finally went home, Eli remained on the church steps, staring at the dark sky.

He felt drained.
He felt overwhelmed.
He felt the weight of responsibility pressing on him like a stone.

He whispered, “King… I don’t know if I can carry this.”

The answer came immediately:

“You are not carrying it. I am.”

Eli bowed his head.

“But it hurts.”

“Love always does.”

He breathed slowly.

“Then help me love like You.”

“I already am.”

The Accusation

The next day, the storm deepened.

The boy’s parents came to the church — angry, defensive, wounded. They demanded to know why Eli had been “interfering,” why he had “encouraged rebellion,” why he had “filled their son’s head with nonsense.”

Eli stood before them, calm but trembling inside.

“I didn’t encourage rebellion,” he said softly. “I listened. I cared. I told him the King loves him.”

The father’s voice rose.

“You had no right.”

Eli swallowed.

“I had a responsibility.”

“To who?” the mother snapped.

Eli met her eyes.

“To the King.”

The room fell silent.

The parents left in anger.

And Eli felt the weight of their words settle on him like a cold wind.

He whispered, “Did I do wrong?”

The King answered:

“You did right. And right is often misunderstood.”

The Night of Doubt

That night, Eli lay awake, staring at the ceiling.

Doubt crept in like a slow fog:

- *What if I made things worse?*
- *What if I overstepped?*
- *What if I’m not ready for this?*
- *What if I’m not who You think I am?*

He turned onto his side, pulling the blanket close.

“King… am I failing You?”

The whisper came — not soft this time, but firm:

“Eli, look at Me.”

He closed his eyes.

And in the quiet of his room, he felt the King’s presence — strong, steady, unshaken.

“You are doing My work.
You are speaking My truth.
You are carrying My heart.”

Eli exhaled shakily.

“But it’s so heavy.”

“Then lean on Me.”

The Morning of Clarity

The next morning, Eli met the boy again.

The boy looked tired, but calmer.

“My parents… they’re still upset,” he said quietly. “But I told them I’m trying. And I told them you’re helping me.”

Eli nodded.

“I’m with you. Every step.”

The boy looked at him with something like hope.

“Why do you care so much?”

Eli smiled gently.

“Because the King cared for me when I was where you are.”

The boy swallowed.

“Do you think He still wants me?”

Eli placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I know He does.”

And the King whispered:

“This is why I called you.”

The Storm That Reveals

That evening, Eli walked into the woods — the place where everything had begun.

He stood in the clearing, breathing in the cool air.

“King,” he whispered, “why does this hurt so much?”

The answer came like thunder wrapped in tenderness:

“Because you are loving with My heart.”

Eli closed his eyes.

“Am I strong enough for this?”

“No. But I am.”

“Will the storms get harder?”

“Yes.”

“Will You stay with me?”

“Always.”

Eli felt tears slip down his cheeks.

He whispered, “Then I’ll keep walking.”

And the King whispered back:

“And I will keep leading.”

Eli stood in the clearing, feeling the storm inside him settle into peace.

He was not failing.
He was not faltering.
He was not lost.

He was being shaped.

And storms do not destroy what the King is building.
They reveal it.

Chapter Eighteen — The Breakthrough

Eli did not know that the storm of Chapter Seventeen had prepared him for something greater.
Storms always feel like endings while you’re inside them.
But when the clouds finally break, you realize they were beginnings.

This chapter is the beginning of Eli’s **affirmation** — the moment the King confirms, publicly and privately, who Eli has become.

Not the boy he was.
Not the broken teenager he had been.
But the man the King has shaped through fire, mercy, and love.

The Morning After the Storm

Eli woke with a strange clarity.

Not relief — storms don't end with relief.
Not triumph — he wasn't celebrating anything.
But clarity.

A sense that something had shifted inside him.

He sat on the edge of his bed, breathing slowly, feeling the quiet presence of the King resting over him like a warm blanket.

He whispered, "I'm still here."

And the King whispered:

"And I am still with you."

Eli closed his eyes.

That was enough.

The Boy Who Returned

Later that afternoon, the boy from the storm — the one whose parents had lashed out, the one who had nearly collapsed under shame — came to find him.

He approached slowly, hesitantly, like someone afraid of breaking something fragile.

"Eli," he said softly, "can we talk?"

Eli nodded.

They sat beneath a tree outside the church, the summer breeze rustling the leaves above them.

The boy took a deep breath.

"My parents… they apologized."

Eli blinked.

"Really?"

The boy nodded.

"They said they were scared. They said they didn't understand. They said they want to try again."

Eli felt warmth spread through his chest.

“That’s good,” he said gently. “That’s really good.”

The boy hesitated.

“And… they said they’re grateful for you.”

Eli froze.

“For me?”

The boy nodded again.

“They said you helped me when they didn’t know how.”

Eli swallowed hard.

He didn’t feel worthy of that.
He didn’t feel strong enough for that.
He didn’t feel like he had done anything extraordinary.

But the King whispered:

“This is My affirmation.”

The Leader Who Saw

That evening, Eli’s youth leader pulled him aside.

“I heard what happened,” he said. “With the boy. With his parents. With everything.”

Eli braced himself.

But the leader smiled — not a small smile, but a deep, knowing one.

“Eli… I’m proud of you.”

Eli’s breath caught.

“You handled it with grace. With courage. With compassion. That’s what a shepherd does.”

Eli shook his head.

“I just tried to help.”

The leader placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You didn’t just help. You stood in the gap. You carried someone else’s burden. You showed the King’s heart.”

Eli felt emotion rise in his throat.

The leader continued:

“I think it’s time you step into something more. Something bigger.”

Eli frowned slightly.

“What do you mean?”

The leader smiled again.

“I want you to help lead the younger boys’ group. Not just assist. Lead.”

Eli’s heart pounded.

“Me?”

“Yes,” the leader said. “You.”

Eli swallowed.

“I don’t know if I’m ready.”

The leader shook his head gently.

“No one is ever ready. But you’re willing. And that’s what the King uses.”

And the King whispered:

“This is who you are becoming.”

The Whisper of Calling

That night, Eli walked into the woods — the place where the King always met him.

The air was cool.
The sky was clear.
The world felt still.

He stood in the clearing and whispered:

“King… is this really what You want?”

The answer came like a warm wind:

“Yes.”

Eli breathed deeply.

“But why me?”

“Because you know My heart.”

“I’m still learning.”

“Then teach from what you know.”

“I’m afraid sometimes.”

“Then lean on Me.”

Eli closed his eyes.

“Will You stay with me?”

The King whispered:

“Always.”

The Breakthrough

Eli felt something shift inside him — not a feeling, not an emotion, but a truth settling into place.

He was not the boy who fell.
He was not the teenager who hid.
He was not the young man who doubted.

He was the man the King had shaped through storms, tears, victories, and love.

He whispered:

“I’ll lead them.”

And the King whispered back:

“And I will lead you.”

Eli opened his eyes.

The breakthrough had come.

Not in a moment of triumph,
but in a moment of surrender.

And that is where the King does His greatest work.

Chapter Nineteen — The Mantle of Leadership

Eli did not feel like a leader.

He didn't feel older.
He didn't feel wiser.
He didn't feel stronger.

He simply felt *called* — and calling has a way of placing a mantle on a person long before they feel ready to wear it.

But the King knew he was ready.
And now, the world around him was beginning to see it too.

The First Gathering

The following week, Eli stood in the small classroom where he would lead the younger boys' group for the first time. The chairs were arranged in a circle. The room smelled faintly of old carpet and dry-erase markers. The hum of the air conditioner filled the silence.

He felt nervous.
Not afraid — just aware.

Aware of the responsibility.
Aware of the weight.
Aware of the King's presence beside him.

One by one, the boys filed in — some shy, some restless, some pretending not to care. Eli recognized the look in their eyes.

He had worn it once.

When everyone had settled, Eli took a breath.

"Hey," he said softly. "I'm Eli. And I'm here to walk with you."

The boys looked at him — curious, cautious, hopeful.

Eli continued:

"I'm not perfect. I'm not here because I have all the answers. I'm here because the King walked with me when I needed Him most. And I want to help you find Him too."

Something shifted in the room — a softening, a quieting, a readiness.

The King whispered:

"Lead them."

And Eli did.

The Boy Who Asked the Hard Question

Halfway through the meeting, a boy raised his hand — small, hesitant, trembling.

"Eli… does the King still love you when you mess up?"

The room fell silent.

Every boy leaned in.

Eli swallowed.

"Yes," he said. "He does."

"But… how do you know?" the boy whispered.

Eli felt the King's presence settle over him like a warm cloak.

"Because I've messed up more times than I can count," Eli said. "And every time, the King called me back. Every time, He forgave me. Every time, He stayed."

The boy's eyes filled with tears.

"So… He won't leave me?"

Eli shook his head gently.

"No. He won't."

The boy exhaled — a shaky, relieved breath.

And Eli realized something profound:

These boys weren't looking for a perfect leader.
They were looking for a faithful one.

The Mentor Who Watched

After the meeting, Eli's youth leader approached him.

"I watched from the hallway," he said quietly.

Eli stiffened.

"Did I… do okay?"

The leader smiled — a deep, proud smile.

"Eli, you didn't just do okay. You shepherded them. You spoke with compassion. You listened with patience. You led with humility."

Eli felt heat rise in his cheeks.

"I just tried to be honest."

"That's why they trust you," the leader said. "And that's why the King is using you."

Eli lowered his head, humbled.

The King whispered:

"This is your mantle."

The Night of Reflection

That night, Eli sat on his bed with the three childhood books beside him. He opened *The Real King Loves Eli* and traced the words with his finger.

He whispered, "I never thought I'd be here."

The King answered:

"I did."

Eli swallowed.

"I'm still learning."

“Good. Never stop.”

“I’m still afraid sometimes.”

“Then lean on Me.”

“I don’t want to fail them.”

“You won’t. Not while you walk with Me.”

Eli closed the book and pressed it to his chest.

He felt the mantle settle on him — not heavy, not burdensome, but steady.

A mantle of compassion.
A mantle of truth.
A mantle of light.

The Man He Was Becoming

The next morning, Eli walked to school with a quiet confidence he had never known before.

Not pride.
Not self-importance.
Just purpose.

He wasn’t the boy who hid in shame.
He wasn’t the teenager who drowned in darkness.
He wasn’t the young man who doubted his worth.

He was a shepherd.
A leader.
A bearer of the King’s heart.

And he was ready for whatever came next.

The King whispered:

“Eli… you are Mine. And I am with you.”

Eli smiled.

He believed it.

Chapter Twenty — The Years That Followed

Eli never set out to build a legacy.
He never imagined himself as a leader, a mentor, or a man others would look to for strength.
He simply kept walking with the King — one day, one step, one whisper at a time.

But that is how legacies are born.
Not through ambition.
Through faithfulness.

And the years that followed would reveal just how deeply the King had shaped him.

The Young Men Who Grew

By his early twenties, the boys Eli had once guided were no longer boys.

They were young men now — taller, stronger, louder, full of questions and fire and uncertainty.
And they still came to him.

Not because he had all the answers.
Not because he was perfect.
But because he listened.
Because he cared.
Because he carried the King's heart.

Some came to him with victories.
Some came with failures.
Some came with wounds they had never spoken aloud.

And Eli walked with each of them.

Patiently.
Gently.
Faithfully.

The King whispered:

"This is your fruit."

And Eli saw it —
in their courage,
in their honesty,
in their growing love for the King.

The Friend Who Returned Strong

The friend Eli had helped years earlier — the one who had once whispered, *"I feel messed up"* — returned one evening with a smile Eli had never seen on him before.

"I'm free," he said quietly.

Eli blinked.

"Free?"

The friend nodded.

"It took years. It took tears. It took falling and getting back up. But I'm free. The King healed me."

Eli felt warmth fill his chest.

"I'm proud of you," he said.

The friend shook his head.

"You walked with me. You didn't give up. You showed me the King's heart."

Eli swallowed hard.

"I just did what He did for me."

The friend smiled.

"That's why it mattered."

And the King whispered:

"This is legacy."

The Calling That Deepened

As Eli grew into adulthood, the King expanded his calling.

He wasn't just guiding boys anymore.
He was guiding families.
Leaders.
Peers.
People older than him.
People younger than him.

People who had never known the King.
People who had walked away from Him.

Eli didn't seek them out.
They found him.

Because light draws the hurting.
Because compassion draws the broken.
Because truth draws the searching.

And Eli carried all three.

The Night of Vision

One night, in his mid-twenties, Eli returned to the woods — the place where everything had begun.

The air was cool.
The stars shimmered above the treetops.
The clearing felt like holy ground.

He stood in the center and whispered:

"King… what now?"

The answer came like a warm wind:

"Look."

Eli closed his eyes.

And he saw —
not with his physical eyes,
but with the eyes of his spirit.

He saw young men walking in freedom.
He saw families restored.
He saw chains breaking.
He saw hearts healed.
He saw generations changed.
He saw light spreading from life to life,
like lanterns igniting across a dark landscape.

He whispered, "Is this… me?"

The King answered:

“This is what I will do through you.”

Eli felt tears slip down his cheeks.

“Why me?”

“Because you know My heart.”

The Man He Became

By the time Eli reached thirty, he had become something he never expected:

A man of mercy.
A man of truth.
A man of compassion.
A man of prayer.
A man of light.

Not because he was strong.
But because the King was.

Not because he was perfect.
But because the King was faithful.

Not because he had earned it.
But because the King had shaped him.

Every storm.
Every whisper.
Every victory.
Every tear.
Every moment of surrender.

All of it had formed him into the man he now was.

And the King whispered:

“Eli… well done.”

Eli bowed his head.

“I’m Yours.”

“And I am yours.”

Chapter Twenty-One — The Message for Those Who Come After

Eli was thirty-five when he finally understood what the King had been shaping all along.

Not just a man of mercy.
Not just a shepherd of the hurting.
Not just a bearer of light.

But a **messenger** —
one who would carry the story of the King's faithfulness
to those who had not yet learned to hope.

This final chapter is not an ending.
It is a commissioning.

The Gathering of the Next Generation

It happened on a warm summer evening.

The church had organized a retreat for the youth — dozens of boys and girls, some confident, some shy, some carrying wounds they didn't yet have words for. Eli had been invited to speak, though he hadn't planned to.

He stood at the back of the room, watching the younger leaders — many of them the same boys he had once mentored — guiding the next generation with the same tenderness he had once shown them.

He felt the King whisper:

"Look at what I have done."

Eli's chest tightened.

This was legacy.
Not fame.
Not recognition.
But lives changed because he had once chosen to walk with the King.

The youth leader approached him.

"Eli," he said, "they need to hear from you tonight."

Eli hesitated.

“Are you sure?”

The leader smiled.

“You’re the one they’ve been waiting for.”

And the King whispered:

“Speak.”

The Story Only He Could Tell

Eli stepped onto the small wooden stage.
The room quieted.
Dozens of young faces turned toward him.

He didn’t bring notes.
He didn’t prepare a sermon.
He didn’t rehearse a speech.

He simply opened his heart.

“When I was your age,” he began, “I walked through darkness I didn’t know how to escape.”

The room stilled.

“I believed lies about myself. I hid. I fell. I broke. And I thought the King was done with me.”

A few heads lowered.
Some eyes filled with tears.

“But He wasn’t done. Not even close.”

Eli felt the King’s presence settle over the room like warm light.

“He called my name when I didn’t want to hear it. He waited when I ran. He forgave me when I fell. He healed me when I thought I was beyond healing.”

He paused.

“And then… He used me. Not because I was strong. But because I was His.”

Silence.
Holy silence.

The kind that only comes when truth is spoken from scars.

The Invitation

Eli looked at the young faces before him — some trembling, some hopeful, some desperate for the very thing he had once needed.

He said softly:

"If you feel broken… the King is calling you.
If you feel ashamed… the King is not ashamed of you.
If you feel lost… the King knows exactly where you are.
If you feel unworthy… the King has already chosen you."

A few tears fell.
A few hands covered faces.
A few hearts cracked open.

Eli continued:

"You don't have to fix yourself before you come to Him.
You don't have to be strong.
You don't have to be perfect.
You just have to say yes."

And the King whispered:

"Call them home."

So Eli did.

"If you want to walk with the King… come."

And they came.

Dozens of them.
Some running.
Some stumbling.
Some barely able to stand.

Eli knelt with them.
Prayed with them.
Wept with them.

And the King moved —
not through thunder,
not through spectacle,
but through love.

The Whisper of Completion

Later that night, after the room had emptied and the lights had dimmed, Eli stepped outside into the cool air. The stars shimmered above him.

He whispered, “King… was that enough?”

The answer came like a gentle embrace:

“It was everything.”

Eli swallowed.

“Is this the end of my story?”

“No,” the King whispered.
“This is the beginning of theirs.”

Eli closed his eyes.

He understood.

His life had never been about rising high.
It had been about going deep.
Deep into mercy.
Deep into compassion.
Deep into the King’s heart.

And now, the next generation would rise —
carrying the same light,
the same truth,
the same hope.

Because one boy had once said yes.

The Man Who Walked With the King

Eli walked home slowly, the night air cool against his skin.

He wasn’t the boy who fell.
He wasn’t the teenager who hid.
He wasn’t the young man who doubted.
He wasn’t even the leader he had become.

He was simply a man who walked with the King.

And that was enough.

As he reached his door, he whispered:

“I’m Yours.”

And the King whispered back:

“And I am yours… forever.”

Eli smiled.

The story was complete.
And yet, it was only beginning.

Benediction

May the King who walked with Eli
walk now with you.

May His voice be the whisper that steadies your steps,
the light that warms your path,
the truth that anchors your heart.

May He remind you — gently, persistently, faithfully —
that you are never beyond His reach,
never outside His mercy,
never forgotten,
never forsaken.

May every shadow you face
be met by His presence.
May every wound you carry
be touched by His healing.
May every fear that rises
be quieted by His love.

And as you go from these pages into your own story,
may you hear the same words Eli heard
in the moments that shaped him:

“I never left.”

May that assurance become your strength.
May His nearness become your peace.
May His calling become your joy.

And may the King —
the One who restores,
the One who redeems,
the One who walks beside His children —
lead you faithfully
all the days of your life.

Amen.

About the Author

Jim Giatas is an author, musician, and songwriter whose work blends spiritual depth with emotional honesty. Born in Manhattan and now living in Fredonia, New York, Jim has spent his life exploring the intersection of faith, creativity, and the human heart. His writing is shaped by decades of personal reflection, pastoral sensitivity, and a deep love for the Scriptures.

Jim is the author of *An Orthodox Journey* and *Soon and Very Soon – The Blessed Hope*, works that reflect his commitment to clear, thoughtful, Christ-centered teaching. His music — featured on his website, **jimgiatas.com** — carries the same themes of longing, redemption, and hope that appear throughout his writing.

In *Eli*, Jim turns his attention to the inner life of a young believer, tracing the arc from innocence to wandering, from brokenness to restoration, and finally from healing to calling. The story reflects Jim's lifelong interest in spiritual formation and his conviction that the King never abandons His children, even in their darkest seasons.

When he is not writing or composing, Jim enjoys the quiet rhythms of rural life, the beauty of Orthodox Christian tradition, and the ongoing work of encouraging others in their walk with God. His desire is simple: to help readers hear the King's whisper again — the whisper that has shaped his own life and faith.

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